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EarthBeat



A Yanomami girl looks on as a medical team with the Brazilian army examines members of the tribe in the state of Roraima July 1, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. (OSV News/Adriano Machado, Reuters)

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Despite hopes that the situation of Brazil's Indigenous would improve under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who took office in 2023, a new report shows that violence increased significantly in 2023.

The Brazilian bishops' Indigenous Missionary Council, known by its Portuguese acronym CIMI released its 2023 annual report on the situation of Indigenous peoples July 22 "with deep sadness" in view of the increased number of violent attacks, explained Cardinal Leonardo Steiner of Manaus in presenting CIMI's report in Brasilia, the nation's capital.

Traditional communities and small growers have been mostly struggling with violence connected to a fight over their territories over the past decades, despite support for them found in the constitution promulgated in 1988. The document determined that all Indigenous peoples should be officially granted their lands within five years — something that has not been done — and it established several rules for the government's land reform program.

With the failure of subsequent administrations to serve those communities, disputes over land, water and forests have grown more and more over the years. During former President Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019-2022), such problems were greatly intensified with his support for grileiros — or land grabbers — and other land invaders and his decision not to grant lands to traditional peoples and landless workers.

Lula pledged during the presidential campaign in 2022 that he would ensure the Indigenous peoples' rights and support landless workers. But his tenure's first year has been disappointing for many.

The president created a Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and announced that profit-oriented intruders such as gold prospectors would be expelled from the Yanomami

reserve. The Yanomami are the largest relatively isolated tribe in South America. They live in the rainforests and mountains of northern Brazil and southern Venezuela. The Yanomami are being killed as their territory is invaded by thousands of illegal gold miners. Lula has declared it "a genocide."

Even though Lula's government had stepped up state controls again and taken action against individuals and groups who were attacking Indigenous people and their territories, violence is still on the rise.

While the number of murders across Brazil fell by 3.4% in 2023, homicides against Indigenous people rose by more than 15% to 208 cases. Since the CIMI began compiling statistics in 2014, only in 2020 have more Indigenous people been murdered (216). The highest figures come from the states of Roraima (47), Mato Grosso do Sul (43) and Amazonas (36).

In addition, 180 suicides of Indigenous people were registered, a significant increase from 115 in 2022. The number of deaths of Indigenous children up to age 4 also rose significantly, from 835 to 1,040. CIMI attributes most infant deaths to poor health care, such as a lack of vaccinations.

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CIMI's executive secretary, Luis Ventura Fernández, described the annual report at the news conference July 22 as a wake-up call and a warning. He said that the reality in the Indigenous areas should be made visible and that the authorities should provide protection.

"Every time it has had to choose between economic interests and the legitimate rights of the original peoples, it has always sacrificed the latter," he said, criticizing the government.

The territorial integrity of the Indigenous reserves has been violated in 1,276 cases, the report said. A legal battle is also currently underway — demanded by the powerful agricultural lobby in parliament — to cancel the law that came into force in the 1988 constitution providing for the Indigenous people to regain all the territories they lost before 1988.

Although Lula had stopped a proposal by the parliamentary group, his veto was overruled in parliament. The Lula government has also not made as much progress as planned with the establishment of new reserves. Although eight new areas were designated, Lula had promised 14 at the start of his presidency.

CIMI's report points out it's financial gains are stopping the government from taking more action.

"The governmental interest in drilling oil by the outfall region of the Amazonas, the budget priority given to agrobusiness and the support of big infrastructure and mining projects in conflict with Indigenous Peoples, such those of the 'Ferrogrão' railway, and the mining in the Mura people's territory in the Amazon, compounded the scenery of dashed hopes," the report said.

Of the 1,381 Indigenous territorial claims, 850, or 62%, were still awaiting a final settlement, the report said.

Lula's Ministry for Indigenous Peoples reacted to the harsh criticism by blaming the previous government, saying it had left behind a "scenario of destruction."